

AFRICAN CULTURE AND ITS INFLUENCES ON THE HYMN

by

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DECLARATION:

I declare that : African Culture and Its Influences On The Hymn is my own work and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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1. Introduction

This study is to provide the students of African Languages, especially those of Zulu literature, with the value of hymns as creative art by virtue of the excellence of their writing, their general aesthetic and artistic merits.

The influences of African culture on the hymn are an attempt to show the African ingenuity in their tunes as "real" music which is fit for use in Christian worship.

1.1 Aim of Study

The aim of study is to motivate cultural heritage amongst Africans, to despise the past in their musical ability and be self-reliant and original instead of imitating the Western musical systems entirely.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The problem is that of solving the question of African music as "real" music worthy of singing when glorifying God. It is evident that influences of African culture have made the Western hymn something different from what it originally was; especially in words, message, tune, rhythm and intonation. It should be stated, however, that praising or worshipping in the form of singing was prevalent long before the White men or Missionaries came. There is also a problem of whether to alter Western hymn tunes or to enliven the words thereof because the tune has its own prosody so should the words.

1.3. Delimitation of Scope

In the late 80's it is strongly felt that adulterated copies of European arts need not be always employed by Africans since Africans themselves have their own necessary material for the purpose. It is therefore appropriate to assess whether African tunes are acceptable for use in Christian worship or not.

1.4 Definition of terms

1.4.1 African

According to Oxford Illustrated Dictionary (1975) African means:-

of Africa or its people,
African person, especially dark-skinned person
as distinct from European or Asiatic
settlers or their descendants.

Shuter's Contemporary Dictionary (1959) says African means:-

pertaining or belonging to Africa,
native of Africa.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1981) says this about African:-

a person from Africa.

All the above clarify that African refers to someone being born on the African continent with special reference to the hair structure and pigmentation as according to the indigenous people found in Africa. It must be noted that in this paper only Africa south of the Sahara will

be treated and not the whole of Africa.

1.4.2 Culture

According to Horton and Hunt (1976: 47) culture is:-

Everything which is socially learned and shared by the members of a society... culture tells us the way in which things should be done.

Culture according to Luthuli (1981: 28):-

... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, customs and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society.

This means that a man cannot live in isolation, therefore he cannot learn words, customs, beliefs and habits on his own. So he needs to belong to a society to develop these standards.

1.4.3 Hymn

Ngcongwane (1983: 3) defines a hymn as:-

an integrated unit of language, music and theology.

According to Van der Leeuw himne is a classical concept, which in

Greek meant:-

’n lied in plegtige styl ter verheerliking
van ’n god wat teenwoordig geag word.

St. Augustine defined a hymn as:

... the praise of God by singing. A hymn is a
song embodying the praise of God. If there
is merely praise, it is not a hymn. For it
to be a hymn, it is needful, therefore, for
it to have three things - praise, praise of
God, and these sung.

A hymn is creative at playing a significant role in the literature
of Africans. It must therefore serve to convey a message to God.
Hymn-singing should come out of one's personal feelings and simply
in one's language so that one can truly be involved in what one is
doing and understand it wholly.

1.5 Research Methodology

The following methods have been used in the research methodology.

1.5.1 The Interview Method

People like Bongani Ngcobo and Mandla Mthembu were interviewed.

1.5.2 Book Research

Certain books; publications and pamphlets were read to clarify what exactly the African influences were on the hymn.

2. The Hymn

The hymn is a spiritual art used to supplement Divine Service in church. It is felt that sometimes when a preacher sees that the congregation is restless, he activates them by singing - like in the Lutheran Church service where the congregation is told, anytime during the service, to stand up and sing and then sit down. A hymn as a means of conveying a certain message to the "heart" must be sung at an accepted and established juncture. Phillips (1968: 233) when commenting on the nature of the hymn, says:

The nature of a hymn, one supposes,
is to sum up, in language which evokes
a response in the human personality,...

The hymn originated from the fixed tunes of pagan origin mainly from Greeks at Mount Olympus. The hymn developed and spread widely to other Western countries and came to Africa with the missionaries. Since the hymn was introduced to Africans a lot of amendments have been made to accommodate it amongst Africans. It must be stated, however, that these amendments can only be mentioned after a picture of the Western hymn has been set forth.

2.1 The Western Hymn

The Western hymn is the most popular for it is mainly reflected in all kinds of hymnbooks. It is the Western kind of church music used regularly in church services. For it to qualify as a hymn it must be liturgical in value. Since it is of fixed tunes it can be sung from memory either by humming or by fitting words. The Western hymn is great in structure and in the power of praising.

Great works of art in Western music like Handel's "Messiah", are fundamentally un-African but are highly respected for their powerful lyrics and stresses. The tonality of the Western hymn is not natural to the African and cannot be described therefore as best music for the African.

The African adopted the hymn from the Western people. Walking in somebody's shoes is very difficult especially if the custom of putting on shoes is new to one. Since singing is a form of relieving one's feelings it is much simpler in one's language because many converts can arise. Singing foreign tunes gives a connotation that the African has lost his identity in as far as his musical ability is concerned. It is essential to highlight African singing to illustrate this point.

2.2 African Singing In Worshipping

The traditional religion of the African people is based upon the ancestral spirits and the supernatural power whom Christianity refers to as God. Music has always been in the veins of an African and no one needs to discover it. Even when performing certain rituals, singing is always prominently featured. Huskisson (1969: 4) had this to say about African

music:-

It must be remembered, however, that the music of the Bantu cannot be divorced or disassociated from the entire complex of Bantu life, individual and communal, and their social and ceremonial pattern of living, both in the villages and in towns. In considering the "traditional" aspect, we find that different ethnic customs are strongly reflected in song.

Singing is very old amongst Africans and a number of terms will suffice to illustrate this. Terms like "ukucula", "ukuhuba", "ukukhonza", "ukuhlabelela", "ukuhaya" and many more specify that singing is indeed a broad concept. There is no specific term for hymns in Zulu and Xhosa. Only the Sotho languages have a definite term for hymns - difela.

The Africans have the right to sing African hymns congenial to African ideas because real music rises from the depths of one's consciousness. The European tunes committed murder to African languages as a result of their ill-fitting words. Ngcongwane (1983: 12) says:

In South Africa the missionaries did not even master the local languages properly, before they started writing hymns.

This simply clarifies the fact that missionaries composed hymns in

poor language. Their compositions however, laid a foundation to all artistic works still to be rendered by Africans themselves. It is remarkable that some Africans, like the Zulu religious leader, Isaiah Shembe, composed hymns. Scheub (1985: 495) remarked:

Christian hymns were composed by the religious leader, Isaiah Shembe (c1868 - 1935), in the early years of the twentieth century. P.J. Gumede and Ngazane Luthuli also composed hymns.

Jones (1976: 41) had this to say about Shembe:

Isaiah Shembe poured out hymns of his own composition, more or less in the Zulu style with characteristic Zulu harmonic structure. ...The Shembe congregations include African dancing as well as singing in their ceremonies.

Since missionaries came with hymns which were mostly of pagan origin in tune, the African is liable, therefore, to compose his own hymns from secular songs and fit the religious words for a start. This is because no true African music is sung in churches up to date. The result of this is the translated hymn brought by the Europeans - for little attention was given towards the development of genuine African hymns. This stands to reason that most of the hymns sung are therefore translated from English tunes.

2.3 The Translated hymn

African languages are very clumsy in translated hymns. Professor Kirby remarked about this in Bantu Studies (volume 4, 1931, p203)

... the Bantu word-system fits ill
with European hymn tunes.

This is because translation results in the distortion of meaning. Southern African languages have words with more syllables than English or any foreign language. This is more experienced with words like God, Lord, heart and bless to quote but a few. The Zulu for example say "uNkulunkulu", "Nkosi", "inhliziyo" and "busisa" respectively. There is but Jehovah used in both English and other African languages and these have the same number of syllables. The only problem with African languages in most cases is that of prefixes. With African hymns extra notes have to be added because European tunes fitted the prosody of their language. It is impossible therefore to use Western tunes while still preserving the natural stresses in African words. The tune then, must have rhythm which suits the African rhythm. The African tonality needs to be utilised and respected because worship must go hand in hand with feelings.

The missionaries must be praised for unearthing the task of giving translations to the hymns. Christians must use their gifts not only within the four walls of the Church but in the world outside where a wholesome presence is so often missing. This they really tried to do but they were not in full demand of the African language and they

forcefully fitted words into their tune. Eventually, the meaning was no longer the same with the original one which the composer had meant to say initially. Ngcongwane (1983: 5) says:

It is necessary that even in song, the words must still say what they mean to say.

It is essential at this juncture to render an English version of a hymn taken from the Alexander Hymns number 3 which was later translated into Zulu. Only the first stanza will be treated. The hymn is titled "Onward, Christian Soldiers!" (1973: 351) Here is the first stanza of this hymn:

Onward, Christian Soldiers!
Marching as to war,
Looking unto Jesus,
Who is gone before.
Christ, the Royal Master,
Leads against the foe;
Forward into battle
See his banners go.
Onward, Christian soldiers!
Marching as to war,
Looking unto Jesus,
Who is gone before.

The Zulu version of this hymn in Incwadi Yokuhlabelela YeBandla lama-Luthere (1973: 75) goes:

Phendukani, zihlobo,

Phendukani nonke!

Nansi inkosi yenu

Inifuna.

Yiyo enguJesu,

Enibiza manje,

Lalelani zwisisani,

Phendukani bo!

Phendukani nonke,

Nize kuy' uJesu

Thembanini yena uMsindisi!

The English version of the above hymn does depict the shortcomings of the translated hymn. Translation of the titles of both versions depicts distortion in meaning. Two verses will be treated from each stanza.

The English verses read:

Onward, Christian Soldiers!

Marching as to war

The Zulu verses are:

Phendukani, zihlobo

Phendukani, nonke

The missionaries referred to Africans as "kinsmen" and not "relatives" or "friends" by saying -zihlobo. They thought the term would be very handy for translation and they also had the intention of telling the

African "to repent" which is "ukuphenduka" in Zulu and not to "turn around" as one may think. They had attended the Holy Wars earlier on as Crusaders. So they took African people to be barbarians who did not want to go to God and leave behind all their possessions. In other words they were prescribing repentance as a prerequisite for Africans. They also took Africans for a very stubborn people because they repeated some words with the notion that the African would ultimately get used to them. Phendukani in the given example suffices in this case. Repetition, however, is a powerful ingredient in poetry. Creative work calls for blending words skilfully whilst the very same words produce or offer a sound message. Translation (of hymns) does not imply either distortion in meaning or confusion. It must be noted that it is not only the African mind that notes this but Jones (1976: 27) has this to say about the ill-translation of hymns by the Europeans to sum all this up:

But as long as people persist in forcing African words into a tune that was made for a language of different quantity and rhythm there will be the danger of cutting off a part of the essential dog instead of lopping off the more or less ornamental tail, so that in the translation of a good original the thought will be often interfered with.

3. African Influences on the hymn

Music as a social interaction is mainly governed by culture. Amongst Africans music portrays life itself. For the African, music engulfs all life situations. Music among the African people calls for feelings and movement. Worship therefore cannot be divorced from feelings. It is essential at this point to remark on the aspects of African music and African rhythm.

3.1 Music and Rhythm

For the African these are inseparable like the sides of a coin. Clarifying these aspects one by one will be attempted hereunder.

3.1.1 Music

Music is the arrangement of sounds in pleasant patterns and tunes. It is an orderly sequence of sounds giving satisfaction to both aesthetic and creative instincts of the performer. African music is basically characterized by melody, harmony and rhythm. According to Huskisson (1969: 2)

... Bantu music is mainly vocal, and that their melody has grown up in association with words. ...All Bantu languages are "tone" languages and thus, melodically, the Bantu song is subordinated to semantic tone by following the rise and fall of the tonal structure of the language.

During the times of our fore-fathers man had to sacrifice a goat or an ox to the ancestors but he had to offer music and dance to God. The African sang to God even in times of sorrow. The ritual of asking for rain from God was often performed. The songs which were sung in such ceremonies are strongly characterized by a falling tone like those sung for wars and funerals. The falling tone bears the mood of begging. It is evident that European music does not have the element of the falling tone. An example of a typical Zulu song with this stamp reads:

Zíphí ?

Nàziyà

Bàyómqàl' òkàNdàbà.

Later a funeral song or chorus was constructed on more or less the same tune. Its lines are as follows:

Ezúlwíní

Kúwé bàbà

Akúngèni sònò khòrà.

The phases of both melodies are lengthened to depict the sad mood so as to make them fairly long.

It must be highlighted that African music, especially the type that is sung to convey a certain message to God is mainly taken from the Bible readings, secular songs and freedom songs. A person living in the slums cannot behave like a bourgeois all the time and in all respects. It therefore needs to be comprehended that African music

is wholly affected by the circumstances surrounding him and it is impossible to divorce one's feelings when one is worshipping. Worship calls for trust, faith and devotion.

3.1.2 Rhythm

This is the most important element in African music. Rhythm is free, fixed and very advanced in African music . Rhythm usually consists of a set of drums, hand-clapping, the stamping of feet, each with a rhythm of its own. Wooden drums provide pulsating rhythm which accompanies singing and dancing. The drumming styles differ in tempo because they depict different denominations. For example, a person who knows some of these denominations quite well can tell if the drums are those of the Zionists or Shembe church. Mthethwa in Koppers (1988: 20) remarks:

✓✓

A monorhythm in African music is not a rhythm, real rhythm begins at cross-rhythm level ... rhythm in African music aesthetics is the resultant of two or more rhythms.

In African music there must be voice, the clapping of hands and the stamping of feet. Other instruments like the guitar and concertina may be used. All these including other various body movements contribute a lot to rhythm.

It must be noted however, that stronger elements like syncopation, heterophony and repetition feature prominently in African music song

in worshipping ceremonies. Call and Response is mostly the order of the day. Remarking on these might be necessary.

3.1.2.1 Syncopation

Syncopation according to Longman's Dictionary refers to changing the beat or rhythm of music by giving force to usually less forceful beats. This is sometimes called robbed rhythm. This is aggravated by emphasis which builds up in staccatos. Hymn 12 of Sotho hymnal when written clearly in staff notation reflects this. Only the first stanza will be written and the first verse will be clarifying the point. It says:

Rea u boka, Morena,
Re ntse re thabela uena;
Re sa phela hamonate
Ka paballo ea hao, Ntate.

So the first verse will read thus:

$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} d : d : d \mid \underline{d : t}, : d \mid \underline{r : m : r} \mid d : - : - \mid \\ \text{Re- a u} \mid \text{bo - ka} \mid \text{Mo - re} \mid \text{na,} \end{array} \right.$

Syncopation is mainly found in translated hymns because singing the foreign tunes demand a clear command of the language where one will understand the stresses and sing them correctly. Africans are dominated by this element in music.

3.1.2.2 Heterophony

Hetero means opposite and as one is concentrating on African music it therefore stands to reason that its opposite at this point in time is the Western hymn. African music is originally heterophonic in the sense that the words not composed by the composer get in and also that the parts used are multiplied by the people singing like adding a second soprano or first tenor and so on. This is similar to drama and poetry, especially traditional poetry, where one adds lines which become melodic though not in composition. In the Western hymn there is absolutely no such. Heterophony goes hand in hand with Call and Response. Another factor which makes African music to be highly heterophonic is that in church there are mainly two groups, namely the youth and the elders.

The elders go for formal worshipping, no movement and a spirit of piety. In many tunes they use largo instead of allegro and this offends the youth. Their way of singing is not devoid of emotional feeling and some even burst out in tears but sometimes they become jolly and that changes the mood and rhythm even on the very same tune. What is surprising is that when they sing choruses they perform dance as a highest form of worship.

The youth on the other hand want to be active and enjoying. They prefer music accompanied by instruments with a lot of movement involved.

3.1.2.3 Repetition

Repetition, as it has already been mentioned before, is mostly present

in the African style of singing. Repetition according to Ngecongwane (1987: 44) is:

A typical African style of telling. Repetition is part of our very nature: you get it in our songs and you get it in our traditional poetry.

Obviously the most interesting aspect of repetition is call and response.

3.1.2.4 Call and Response

In this type of repetition there usually is a leader of the song like in the Isicathamiya music where one guides the followers. The example of this is clearly depicted in the Ladysmith Black Mambazo's song Amagugu Alelizwe Ayosal' Emathuneni. The song says:

Amagugu alelizwe ayosal' emathuneni

Nqiyolala ngingedwa ethuneni lami,

Sengiyolala ngingedwa ethuneni lami.

The leader of the group is sometimes heard saying "Amagugu", "Sengish' amagugu" or even "Hhay' amagugu" at different intervals and then his followers will then take his beat together with him. He sometimes intrudes melodically even in the middle of a line like in "ngingedwa"

and so on.

This happens in Western hymns though formally composed as choral music like in an English hymn in the Alexander's Hymns (1973: 71) which says:

I need Thee every hour,
Most gracious Lord;
No tender voice like Thine
Can peace afford

Refrain:

I need thee, Oh, I need Thee:
Every hour I need Thee;
Oh, bless me now, my Saviour,
I come to Thee!

"No tender" and "Oh! bless me now" are usually used in "intruding" this song. Certainly this is done harmoniously.

3.2

Message and Words

Words are a means of conveying a message. To receive a message calls for appropriate words because words express one's sincerest state of mind. Western hymns employ a refrain to emphasize what they call message. It is therefore hard for the African to preserve the words of a Western tune because it is mostly intolerable when bent into African tune. An example of this is that Africans have a strong audible vowel in the last syllable such as in Amen they reinforce

the word by adding the vowel -i- and the word becomes Ameni. Many words are usually bent from their Western origins to be Africanized. A line reading thus "God let the day have peace in this house" may read "Godi lethi deyi hevi phisi in thisi housi". This is even difficult to write but its composer or rather the man behind its words "loves" this conglomeration. To express one's feelings one must use one's mother-tongue. This kind of "translation" by the African is an adoption of the master's language. Ngcongwane (1987: 31) says:

... translation cannot be regarded as the best thing to do with a work of art Every language has its own unique phonological, morphological and syntactical features that cannot be rendered in another language and still look exactly the same.

3.3 Tune and Intonation

Tune is the arrangement of musical sounds and intonation refers to the pattern of rise and fall in the level or pitch of the voice as according to Longman's Dictionary.

The tunes which came with the missionaries were ready for most hymns and they had to fit African words into these tunes. It is very hard to do this because African languages have intonation and obviously the meaning is ultimately destroyed.

The African has therefore felt comfortable with his secular songs and has composed words for the so-called songs in order to accommodate Christianity. To preserve a tune one must often involve violence. Western music as "popular" music in church according to Africans is "out of fashion" and African music is in. Mthethwa in Koppers (1988:21) remarks:

The Christian church too which used to think that only European music appealed to the Lord, has suffered a lot of pressure as a result of rejection and adaptation of the European church hymns by African congregations. It is through study of indigenous music and accompanying dance forms that we can hope to find solutions for problems in other music genres. The rejection of Western hymns for example, and the outcry by the church interpreted as rejection of Christianity by Africans, can only be reconciled by understanding indigenous music and its concepts first.

An African song reading thus reads:

Inj' emnyama

Idonswa ngeketanga,

Ngabe kwenzenjani!

Izinja zobulawelani!

This song has turned out to be a church song which says:

Siphum' enqamlezweni

Sithethelelw' izono,

UJesu namhlanje.

Sathan' uzoyidel' inkani.

This is pure African music, genuine in style and created by the African mind for the African child through African culture.

4. Evaluation

The hymn as Western music has rhythm, melody and harmony and the African had to accept it as such because it was prescribed to him by the churches. Music means life itself to Africans because it is a social interaction governed by culture. Africans cannot be isolated from music because that would mean death itself.

If African music can be sung in church even the youth that no longer attend services would be easily encouraged to go there. Nothing except music chucks out many people from church. This does not mean that all what is Western musically should be discarded, but other cultural influences should be accommodated.

The hymn therefore will always be bent into whatever the African wants it to be, for there is no need to imitate the Western musical systems entirely, since the African has not lost his identity.

The study of hymns to Africans is however, a new trend. This means that there is still a lot more to be unearthed, but much has already been attempted.

In conclusion Dr Louw in Jones (1976: 49) remarked:

When one true African Christian is brought to disregard any form of church music that he may have known in the past, and breaks forth praising God in the musical idiom that lies closest to his heart, half the battle will have been won. This is not impossible.

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